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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Russ Blackburn honored with Pete Hegener Leadership Award



Russ Blackburn was presented with the prestigious Pete Hegener Leadership Award May 18. Photo by MaryAnn Ketcham

Port St. Lucie/May 19, 2023 – Russ Blackburn, Port St. Lucie’s recently retired city manager, was presented with the prestigious Pete Hegener Leadership Award by the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County (EDC) at its ninth annual leadership dinner on May 18.

The award is presented annually to a dedicated business leader who has made significant contributions to St. Lucie County’s economy and quality of life. The annual dinner and celebration, held at the

Harbour Ridge Yacht & Country Club and attended by approximately 200, was sponsored by Bank of America.

EDC's eighth annual Pete Hegener Leadership Award winner Rob Lord presented the award to Blackburn, who was nominated by multiple community members.

Blackburn's career in public service has spanned almost five decades. Starting out as a planning and community development staffer, he served in deputy administrator roles in South Carolina; Lee County, Florida; and Virginia prior to his appointment as Martin County Administrator in 1997. During his eight-year tenure in Martin County, he increased citizen satisfaction levels by 43%, received the 2003 International City/County Management Association (ICMA) award for intergovernmental cooperation, and led the post Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne recovery efforts.

Blackburn left Martin County in 2005 to become Gainesville's city manager where he assisted the city in gaining recognition as one of the top municipalities in the nation. During his 10 years with the city, he developed innovative leadership and emerging leaders programs.

In 2016, as the city of Port St. Lucie reached the 200,000-population mark and struggled with significant financial challenges such as a dormant 1,200-acre jobs corridor, a vacant research facility for which the city had guaranteed the debt, and a city center mired in legal problems, Blackburn was hired as city manager. Utilizing a team approach and strong organizational development skills, Blackburn's leadership was a major factor in the city's recovery and economic progress.

At the time Blackburn retired earlier this year, only approximately 250 acres of developable land remained unspoken for in the jobs corridor in Southern Grove, with millions of dollars in property values already created and thousands of jobs anticipated. The research centers are thriving under the direction of Cleveland Clinic and the Florida Institute of Technology with more than 140 scientists and staff engaged in high-level bio-science studies. And, after successful negotiations with multiple tax certificate holders led by Blackburn, Port St. Lucie was able to acquire city center from a federal receiver and begin planning for its future development.

"He left a legacy of taking challenges, turning them into opportunities, and ultimately success stories," read one nomination. "Throughout his six-year tenure in Port St. Lucie, he continued to support and inspire the next generation of public servants and built an award-winning city team."

Another nomination focused on the long-awaited creation of a jobs corridor: Russ's leadership "accelerated the development of Tradition, brought in taxes much earlier and gave the residents of the city of Port St. Lucie and county opportunities to work closer to home so much earlier than expected."

The dozen members of the EDC leadership selection committee chose Blackburn as the person who best embodies the leadership and vision of the award's namesake, Pete Hegener, from a field of 11 nominees, including four other semi-finalists: Charlotte Bireley, St. Lucie County tourism and marketing director; Philip Busch, Southern Eagle Distributing president; Larry Lee Jr., State Farm agent; and the late Anthony F. Sansone Sr., Sansone Group founder.

Recent Hegener Award recipients include Michael Minton, shareholder at Dean, Mead, Minton & Moore; the late Bud Adams of Adams Ranch; Ken Pruitt, former Florida Senate president and former St. Lucie County property appraiser; and Tammy Roncaglione, CenterState Bank community president.

In addition to Bank of America's presenting sponsorship, other leadership dinner award sponsors were Ashley Capital; Dean, Mead, Minton & Moore; PGA Golf Club; Apfelbaum Law; Broward, Palm Beaches and St. Lucie REALTORS®; Carr, Riggs & Ingram; Culpepper & Terpening Inc.; Florida Power & Light Company; GL Homes; Hi-Tide Boat Lifts; OCULUS Surgical; Seacoast Bank; UES; BBL Medical Facilities®; Comcast Business and the Tambone Companies.

About the award

The recipient of the Pete Hegener Leadership Award exemplifies the qualities of a visionary, a trusted role model and leader whose inspiration and achievements impact the quality of job creation, economic vitality and business growth.

Pete Hegener, the man whose actions inspired this award, was a founding member and integral partner of the EDC, served on the Board of Directors, and was an Executive Committee member. Pete was a pillar of the St. Lucie County community, having played a key role in the development of western St. Lucie County and Tradition. Friends and colleagues described him as "honest, visionary, and caring." He passed away in March 2012, but his legacy is recognized through this award.

About the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County

The Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County (EDC) is a private, not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting economic vitality in St. Lucie County through the attraction, retention and expansion of businesses in the community. The EDC works in partnership with local governments and the private sector to advance its goals of creating more and better-paying jobs for residents, broadening the tax base and improving St. Lucie County's economic quality of life. Contact the EDC at 772.336.6250, contact@youredc.com or www.youredc.com.